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ABSTRACT

The research agenda for English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) teaching and learning summarizes issues identified for further study by ESL professionals over the period of 1996-1998. The document is designed to provide funding agencies with clear priorities for research suggested by leaders in the field, provide researchers with support for proposing specific projects, and provide a focus for discussion about improvement of ESL programs. Recommendations are made for research and development in the areas of: adult ESL learners; program design, instructional content, and practices; teacher preparation and staff development; assessment and outcomes; policy; and priority issues. In each area but the last, five to ten specific research questions are presented. Contains 32 references. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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Acknowledgments

This research agenda reflects the thoughtful comments of many adult ESL educators who responded via e-mail, regular mail, and telephone or in person wherever the agenda was posted or discussed. Some of you we know personally, but the majority of you we do not. We are grateful for your input. You represent the spectrum of stakeholders in the field from learners to policy makers. Most of you are practitioners, researchers, or program administrators. Because of your input, we are confident that this publication represents the voice of the field.

Although we cannot mention each respondent personally, we would like to acknowledge the hard work and unwavering support of certain individuals. Our deepest appreciation goes to the following people:

- each of the meeting participants listed in Appendix C, for helping us to launch the project and giving it direction and support throughout;
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Foreword

English as a Second Language (ESL) programs are the fastest growing component in federally funded adult education efforts. In 1996, over 1.5 million adults participated in ESL programs across the country. Enrollments are expected to increase due to immigration and welfare and educational reforms.

This research agenda for the adult ESL field is designed to assist researchers in their effort to formulate research designs for specific projects, provide potential funders of research with priorities and program needs, and encourage adult education practitioners not only to become active partners in the teaching and learning process but also to engage in research on ways to improve educational opportunities for adults learning English in work, family, and community contexts. This paper, prepared by the National Clearinghouse on ESL Literacy Education (NCLE), will complement the adult education agenda that has been prepared by the Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE), the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL), and the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL). These coordinated agendas have resulted in nonduplication of effort and a more integrated approach to research and development that will help advance the leadership and vision for the improvement and expansion of program services for adult learners, including English language learners.

It is my hope that this agenda will stimulate action among researchers, policymakers, and practitioners interested in providing quality programs for adult English language learners. I hope that it will be an informative and practical resource to you.

Ronald S. Pugsley, Director
Division of Adult Education and Literacy
U.S. Department of Education

Introduction

Adult English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction is the fastest growing area of adult education (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997). Although much is known about "best practices" in adult ESL, there are still many unanswered questions about the adult English language learner, program design, teacher preparation, instruction, and assessment. The answers to these questions are critical, not only to improve the effectiveness of adult ESL programs but also to improve the lives of adult ESL learners.

The National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education (NCLE) at the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) was asked by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) to assist in the development of a research and development agenda focused specifically on adult English language learners and adult ESL program issues. NCSALL collaborated with the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) and the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Vocational and Adult Education and its Division of Adult Education and Literacy (OVAE/DAEL) to develop a comprehensive national research and development agenda for the improvement of Adult Basic Education (ABE), English as a Second Language (ESL), and Adult Secondary Education (ASE) programs. The ESL agenda fits into this larger effort. A separate research and development agenda is needed to address adult ESL issues because, although the field of ESL shares certain common features and challenges with ABE and ASE, there are also differences that merit their own inquiry. Adult ESL learners represent diverse cultural backgrounds and orientations. They must learn a whole new system of communication—speaking and listening as well as reading and writing and the sociocultural aspects of communicating in their communities. This agenda will guide existing research efforts and encourage an increase in research and development focused on adult ESL learning and literacy.

As the first step in the agenda-setting process, NCLE conducted a literature review of adult ESL publications and produced a draft research agenda. This draft was shared with a group of adult ESL researchers, program staff, and policy makers (listed in Appendix C), some of whom came together for a meeting at CAL on December 16, 1996. A second draft was then prepared that contained both the literature review and the priority issues identified at the December meeting. That draft was circulated among the larger adult ESL community for comments and suggestions. Finally, a third draft was prepared and sent to a sample of stakeholders (listed in Appendix D) for review and comment. Feedback on the third draft was also collected at the 1998 Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) Conference, where the agenda was shared and discussed. Comments and suggestions from all these sources have informed this version of the agenda.

This adult ESL research agenda has three major purposes. First, it is designed to provide funding agencies with clear priorities for research suggested by leaders in the field. NCSALL, NCLE, and TESOL will share this agenda with possible funding organizations. Second, it provides researchers with support for proposing specific projects. Researchers are encouraged to work together to seek funding that will address these critical questions. Third, it provides a focus for discussion about how to improve adult ESL programs. NCSALL, NCLE, and TESOL will provide several occasions over the next year for this agenda to be discussed and refined. At the same time, individuals and organizations in the field are encouraged to use this document as a vehicle for promoting discussion on how research can help improve practice and encourage policy changes to better serve adult ESL learners. The questions are, for the most part, broad and overarching. It remains for researchers to design studies that will answer part or all of a particular question or set of questions.

There are a number of national funding sources that could support research to address the questions laid out in this agenda. They include the Office of Educational Research and Improvement's (OERI) Field-Initiated Studies, DAEL's National Program Funds, projects funded by the Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Languages Affairs (OBEMLA), NIFL's Equipped for the Future initiative, and some of NCSALL's existing and future studies. At the state level, State Directors of Adult Education will, most likely, have research funds available under new funding from Congress and their state legislatures. Researchers and practitioners within states should use this document to support their proposals for studies, or they could also form consortia across states to explore the issues raised in this document. Foundations that have an interest in ESL populations are another source of support for this research.

The Research and Development Agenda

The literature reviewed for this paper (see Appendices A and B) and feedback from the field suggest five general areas around which research questions in the field of adult ESL cluster:

- the learners themselves;
- program design and instructional content and practices;
- teacher preparation and staff development;
- learner assessment and outcomes; and
- policy.

Although scholars and practitioners have made progress toward understanding what makes adult ESL programs effective and efficient, many questions remain. Research and development in these areas would yield beneficial information for adult ESL practitioners, program administrators, staff development professionals, policy makers, scholars, and learners.

Adult ESL Learners

Adult learners' experiences with life and decision making provide a strong foundation for their learning (Knowles, 1980). At the same time, adults lead complex lives, balancing job and family responsibilities with their educational pursuits. These adult responsibilities often result in intermittent attendance, interrupted attention to course content, and a pattern of repeated dropping out and re-entering the same or different programs (Young, Morgan, Fitzgerald, & Fleishman, 1994).

Although adult ESL learners share these characteristics with other adult learners, they also have distinct characteristics. They are usually new to U.S. culture as well as to its language. They may feel excluded from local cultural practices and institutions and insecure about their economic, housing, family, or employment situations (Cumming, 1992). Their cultural background may influence their expectations about appropriate classroom activities and of the roles of teachers and students (McGroarty, 1993). The educational background of adult ESL learners varies widely as does their proficiency in speaking, understanding, reading, and writing their own language and English (Rice & Stavrianos, 1995; Wrigley & Guth, 1992). Each of these factors has implications for program goals and design, instructional practice, teacher preparation, and assessment.

The National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) was the most recent national effort to measure literacy among the adult population in the United States (Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, & Kolstad, 1993). Of the 28.4 million people with a non-English background, 12.8 million (45%) described themselves as biliterate in English and another language, 7.9 million (28%) said they had literacy skills *only* in English, and 6.3 million (22%) said they could read and write *only* in their native language. Ten million (35%) were placed in the lowest literacy category (Level 1) as measured by the NALS. This figure includes those literate in their native language but not able to take the test in English in addition to those with low literacy skills in English. There are some recent studies that indicate the positive effects that native language literacy has on the acquisition of English (Carlo & Sylvester, 1997; Gillespie, 1994; Hornberger, 1994), but more research and data are needed on the uses of literacy and biliteracy in order to inform decisions about the types of educational programs that adult ESL learners need (Wiley, 1996).

Questions for Research

1 What is the range and variation of English literacy activities in which adult English learners engage? How do adult English learners solve or fail to solve language and literacy challenges?

2 What are the roles of native language oral and literate proficiencies in the acquisition of oral English and English literacy skills? How do these impact the length of time necessary to acquire needed proficiencies in English?

3 How can classroom instruction build on the knowledge, experiences, cognitive skills, informal language acquisition opportunities, and academic background that adult learners bring with them?

4 What roles do language and literacy play in changing family, work, and community relationships, including shifts in power and authority? What implications does this have for learner motivation and program planning?

5 What are the participation patterns of adult English learners in formal programs? What factors promote or inhibit participation? What are the barriers, perceived or real, to future educational opportunities? How do social, economic, and political marginalization affect learner program participation and progress?

6 How have local, state, and national policies affected the kinds of learners that participate in programs?

Research and development can provide a clearer and more comprehensive understanding than we now have of the strengths that adult learners bring to ESL classes, the internal and external barriers to successful learning, and the effective ways to encourage learner participation that will lead to learner persistence and, ultimately, to higher levels of achievement.

Program Design and Instructional Content and Practices

Different types of adult ESL programs have been developed to meet the diverse goals of both learners and program funding agencies. Demand for programs of every type is high, and many programs have waiting lists (The waiting game, 1996). Adult ESL program types include survival or life skills, pre-employment ESL, workplace ESL, pre-academic ESL, vocational ESL (VESL), ESL for citizenship, and ESL family literacy (Chisman, Wrigley, & Ewen, 1993). Services are provided by a wide variety of institutions that include local education agencies, community colleges, libraries, community-based and volunteer organizations, churches, businesses and unions, small for-profit language schools, and some four-year colleges and universities (Center for Applied Linguistics, 1995).

Adult learning theory stresses the value of instructional approaches that respect and draw upon learners' experiences and strengths (Knowles, 1980). Most adult ESL practitioners agree that adults learn best when they are actively involved with all aspects of their instruction, including identifying content, choosing activities, and assessing progress. This learner-centered philosophy can be found in many different approaches to instruction (Auerbach, 1992; Crandall & Peyton, 1993; Holt, 1995; Wrigley & Guth, 1992).

Current instructional approaches include competency-based, whole language, participatory, and more traditional approaches such as grammar-based, the direct and the oral/aural method. Programs often combine approaches and may implement the same approach with a variety of techniques. In fact, many practitioners and academics maintain that, because no single approach is suitable for all ESL populations and contexts, multiple approaches may be required to meet the needs of individual learners (Bell, 1991; Holt, 1995; Shank & Terrill, 1995; Wrigley & Guth, 1992). The use of instructional technology is also growing in programs for adults, although its use remains limited (Gaer, 1998; U.S. Congress, 1993).

Questions for Research

1 How can the need be met for regular and systematic data collection about programs that serve adults learning English? What kinds of data would be useful to teachers and tutors, administrators, staff developers, and funders in order to improve the quality of service? How can this data be collected and made accessible to the various stakeholders?

2 What are the key features differentiating program types (life skills, pre-employment, etc.), and what criteria should be considered in decision making about program design and instructional content and practices? What existing program design models facilitate learner participation in the development of curricula and choice of instructional methods? How do we integrate personal, academic, and learning skills development with language skills development?

3 What instructional sequences and approaches work most effectively for different groups of learners (e.g., low-level readers or learners with professional degrees)? What instructional techniques have the ability to move adult learners from being passive to empowered learners?

4 How can the use of technology enhance the effectiveness of programs? What are the critical variables that make the use of technology effective? How can technology best be integrated into different types of programs?

5 What program models and curricula facilitate transitions between courses and programs?

6 What program designs encourage adult English learners to use various community resources to learn language outside of limited classroom hours?

7 What are inexpensive and yet effective strategies for providing instructional services to learners who are not yet formally enrolled in programs?

8 How have local, state, and national policies (including the creation of learning and program standards) affected the kinds and quality of programs that are available to adult English learners?

Research and development should lead to a better match between adult learner needs and program types and provide a clearer sequence of steps to facilitate learning.

Teacher Preparation and Staff Development

The background, skills, and training of adult ESL teachers vary widely. Most adult ESL teachers have a college degree, but rarely with a specialization in adult education, literacy, or second language learning. The majority of teaching jobs in adult ESL programs are part time, without contracts or benefits. Some programs are staffed almost entirely by volunteers. Many teachers work in several different programs or function as both teachers and administrators within one program. Staff turnover is high, and many teachers and administrators leave the field after a few years (Crandall, 1993).

Teacher and tutor training opportunities are limited. Voluntary, unpaid attendance at in-service workshops, conferences, or seminars once or twice a year is the norm (Crandall, 1993; Kutner, 1992). Teachers and tutors may receive 15-20 hours of instruction when they first start working in a program, but little thereafter.

The following models for professional development are currently cited in the literature as effective (Crandall, 1994):

- the mentoring model, which pairs inexperienced teachers with experienced teachers;
- the applied-science model, which links published research with practical experience; and
- the inquiry or reflective teaching model, which combines involvement in research, teacher education, and teaching in a simultaneous process.

Questions for Research

1 What experiences, values, knowledge, and skills characterize effective adult ESL teachers?

2 What types of pre-service courses best prepare teachers for teaching in adult ESL programs? What models of student teaching in TESOL preparation programs are best for such teachers?

3 What are the professional development needs of adult ESL teachers? Do current professional development practices meet those needs, or should other models be developed?

4 What employment conditions and working environments support the development of effective teachers?

5 What is the relationship between staff training and both program quality and learner achievement?

6 How do researchers and practitioners inform each other? How do adult ESL practitioners gain access to information on research and best practices, and what do they do with that information? How can teachers and tutors capture what they learn in their individual inquiries and make that knowledge accessible to others? Where and how can researchers best work with ESL practitioners?

7 What local, state, and national policies are in place to support and promote effective professional development for teachers and tutors? What policies need to be created?

Research and development should determine what employment conditions, skills, and on-going staff development adult ESL practitioners need and what is the most cost-effective way to provide them.

Assessment and Outcomes

Across the board, whether in ABE, ASE, or ESL, programs are hearing that they must be accountable for the funding and support they receive by demonstrating learner progress and program impact. Programs are struggling to define what counts as progress for each of the stakeholders and how it can be demonstrated and reported to everyone's satisfaction—learners, teachers, program administrators, the local community, funders, and policy makers. Some program staff and researchers fear that, to satisfy the demands of funders and policy makers, a misguided assessment system could arise that would then drive program design so that the best interests of the learners and, in the long run, the community would not be served. There is also confusion about the role that assessing learner progress and outcomes has in measuring program quality. Learner assessment is only one of many factors to consider in judging program quality (Burt & Keenan, 1995). However, the impasse created by lack of agreement on how to assess and report learner achievement must be surmounted so the field can look at what various measures tell about learner progress and program impact.

Standardized or commercially available tests such as the BEST, CASAS, ESLOA, and BINL[1] are often used in adult ESL programs to assess English language proficiency, but there is no clear understanding of how scores on these different tests compare. In addition, there is no generally accepted definition of proficiency in English (Holt, 1994). There are no speaking, listening, reading, and writing proficiency guidelines for adult ESL that are used by programs across states for comparative purposes. The student performance levels (SPLs), developed under the auspices of the Office of Refugee Resettlement's Mainstream English Language Program (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1985), describe oral proficiency quite well, but do less well for literacy.

Many adult ESL programs use a combination of standardized and alternative and program-developed tools to assess learner progress, including portfolios, checklists, interviews, observations, and performance-based tests. However, alternative assessment tools are time-consuming, make it difficult to report learner progress in a way that satisfies funders, and do not always provide the documentation needed to allow learners to enter training or academic programs (Fingeret, 1992; McGroarty, 1993; Wrigley, 1992).

Measures of program impact depend, to a large extent, on program goals. In a family literacy program, for example, outcomes might consist of an increase in parents' reading to their children or the presence of more books in homes, in addition to increased proficiency in English (Holt, 1995). In workplace programs, outcomes might include promotion to higher-level jobs, increased participation in work teams, or fewer complaints from customers (Alamprese, 1994). Unfortunately, there are no major longitudinal studies that yield valid data on the impact of participation in adult ESL programs.

[1] Basic English Skills Test, Comprehensive Adult Survey Achievement System, English as a Second Language Oral Assessment, Basic Inventory of Natural Language.

Questions for Research

1 What immediate and long-term impact can be expected from the various types of adult ESL programs? What impact does learner participation in such programs have on learner communities?

2 How can adult ESL programs best capture what learners know and what they have learned?

3 What is the cost in time, staffing, and funds to effectively assess and document learning outcomes?

4 How can each of the stakeholders in a program participate in determining what counts as progress?

5 How do measures of program impact, such as an increase in reading to one's children or a job promotion, correlate with increases in English language proficiency?

6 How might a national proficiency scale (similar to American Council of Teachers of Foreign Language's scale or the California Model ESL Standards) facilitate the reporting of learner progress and program impact?

7 Which assessment instruments can reliably document changes in learner performance at what levels? Can these instruments serve all types of adult ESL programs?

8 What changes in program design and staff development are needed to ensure that current and new assessment tools are reliably used?

9 How could technology facilitate the implementation of a system for documenting learner outcomes and program impact?

10 How do local, state, and national policies affect assessment tools and practices and what policies need to be created?

Research and development should define the kinds of assessment that are needed to best match program requirements and measure learners' progress toward their goals and, if necessary, to develop improved tools to assess progress and impact.

Policy

Finally, a national agenda for adult ESL education raises questions in the areas of federal, state, and local policies. Policies affect the ability of local ESL programs to meet learner needs. At the federal level, for example, legislation limiting benefits for legal resident immigrants has sparked an increase in the demand for citizenship classes (Nixon & Keenan, 1997). Although state administrators have always had flexibility in designing their adult education programs, they will need guidance to set policy and determine levels of support for all adult learner populations (ABE, ASE, and ESL) as even greater policy-making authority is shifted to the states by Congress through block grants.

Questions for Research

1 What is the appropriate role of learner assessment in national policy?

2 What has been the impact of recent federal policy changes (e.g., emphasis on employment outcomes, integration of service delivery systems, welfare reform) on the adult ESL delivery systems and the people they serve?

3 What would be the impact on adult ESL programs of removing federal set-aside requirements on the adult education system?

4 What information do state and local officials need for making decisions that will affect adult ESL programs? How can this information be obtained? How can state and local officials find out how many learners are in need of ESL services?

5 What strategies should these officials use to establish state and local policy?

Priority Issues

The group assembled for the December 1996 meeting at the Center for Applied Linguistics (see appendix C) came to a consensus that these are the priority research and development issues:

- **assessment of adult ESL learner progress and achievement and**
- **measurement of the impact of participation in adult ESL programs on the lives of participants.**

The feedback from the field supports these priorities. The field of ESL needs a battery of assessment tools to serve a wide variety of program types and a range of assessment objectives, including speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Some of these tools must be comprehensive and have a high degree of reliability for use in research and evaluations that measure program impact. Other tools must be easy to administer and usable in a wide variety of program types for program accountability. Still others must be informal and useful to teachers and learners to judge progress and inform the teaching and learning process. These tools must measure improvements in speaking, listening, reading, and writing, as well as the impact that participation in adult ESL programs has on learner ability to perform the roles of worker, family member, and community participant.

Conclusion

This document is, and will continue to be, a work in progress. It describes what we know about adult English language learners and conditions that promote their learning. It also delineates the issues that those working in the field of adult ESL education believe should be explored next. As the agenda is discussed and answers to the questions posed above are discovered, the agenda and priorities will change. Yet the answers will enable adult ESL programs to develop a framework with which to judge improvements in curriculum, instructional and assessment practices, program design, staff development, and policy. Institutions with a stake in this field need to take a leadership position in encouraging productive dialogue about these issues and in promoting the development of resources to pursue research in these areas.

Appendix A
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